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RR RUEHAG RUEHDF RUEHIK RUEHLZ RUEHROV
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FM AMEMBASSY TALLINN
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UNCLAS TALLINN 001077

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STATE PASS TO USTR
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SENSITIVE
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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: EAGR EFIS ETRD TBIO EN
SUBJECT: ESTONIA: REACTION TO RUSSIA RESTRICTS ON FISH IMPORTS

REF: MOSCOW 12692

¶1. (U) As reported reftel, on November 24 the Russian Ministry of Agriculture issued an order limiting the number of border check points through which fish and fish products can enter Russia, excluding both of Estonia's land border points. 100% of Estonia's USD 40 million in fish exports to Russia (one-fifth of total fish exports) normally passes through these two border points.

¶2. (SBU) The Government of Estonia is working to address Russian restrictions both bilaterally and through EU channels. On November 27, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) summoned Nikolai Uspenski, Russia's Ambassador to Estonia, to receive an urgent diplomatic note requesting that Russia provide a fact-based explanation for the new restrictions. On the same day, the Estonian Veterinary and Food Board (EVFB) also sent an official inquiry to the Russian Federal Veterinary and Phytosanitary Surveillance Service (VPSS). According to Ago Partel, Director General of the EVFB, the GOE has not yet received any response from the GOR, and Partel's Russian counterpart is currently traveling outside of Russia. Partel told us that the GOE wants to start negotiations with Russia immediately. He has already obtained a Russian visa in case he needs to travel to Moscow on short notice.

¶3. (SBU) On November 28, Partel raised Estonian concerns on this issue at the regular meeting of the European chief veterinary officials in Brussels. As a result of the meeting, the EU Commission plans to send an inquiry to Moscow asking for an explanation of the new restrictions. GOE contacts tell us, however, that they believe the bilateral approach with Russia is more likely to bring results than EU efforts.

¶4. (U) Estonia's fish exports to Russia consist mostly of frozen sprat and Baltic herring. According to Hannes Ulmas, Head of the Fish Trade Department of the Ministry of Agriculture, the GOR's decision to impose these restrictions during the active catch season makes it impossible for Estonian exporters to make plans for the current or spring catch season. The GOE is particularly concerned about the impact on small and medium-sized fish exporters, who are the dependent on access to the Russian market.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: Although the Estonian food industry is accustomed to the somewhat unpredictable nature of the Russian market, this recent restriction on fish import to Russia in the middle of catch season came very unexpectedly. Unless a quick solution is negotiated with

the GOR, it could put a number of small and medium fish exporters out of business. End Comment.

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